

Get ready for smoky mountaintops

State plans controlled burns at Jocassee Gorges for habitats

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SALEM — Upstate travelers along S.C. Highway 11 near Oconee and Pickens could soon be seeing smoke signals curling from the mountaintops in the coming weeks.

Don't be alarmed. According to South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (DNR) officials, the smoke is not some raging wildfire, but rather controlled burns scheduled at Jocassee Gorges to restore habitat and improve safety.

For safety, burning would take place when weather conditions are suitable. A burn should take four to eight hours to be completed, although some smoldering from scattered stumps, logs and dead trees could linger through the night. As an added safety precaution, fires will be surrounded by multiple fire breaks, including existing preserve roads, streams, plowed fire breaks and breaks put in with hand tools in sensitive areas.

State officials say that by using controlled burns — at

times when wind, temperature and humidity conditions are appropriate to mitigate forest fuel such as leaves, pine needles and twigs — fire managers are able to greatly reduce the chances of a catastrophic wildfire that could threaten homes and people. Officials say that after controlled burns are completed, the homes and properties close to Jocassee Gorges would

be less likely to be in the path of a wildfire because the fuel is reduced or eliminated.

Mark Hall, a DNR wildlife biologist and forest planner, says prescribed burns have ecological benefits because many species and ecosystems need fire to ensure their survival.

“Through the centuries, many native plants, animals and habitats in the southeastern United States have adapted to the presence of recurring fire,” Hall said. “Many species and ecosystems are now rare because of fire suppression ...”